

## Discovery and Research of Megalith Relics in Viet Nam

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**Abstract:** Megalith relic is one of archaeological relic types discovered in many parts of the world. It is assumed that Vietnam megalithic relic is a division of complex Megalithic Culture in Southeast Asia. Despite findings from the early twentieth century, the study of Megalith in Vietnam is currently in the initial stage. This paper presents some 40 typical relics of Megalith found in Vietnam with three main types: Dolmen, the majority mainly distributed in the northeast mountain areas; Menhir, appeared in Hoa Binh and Thanh Hoa provinces; Stone-cist at small quantities, only found in Southeastern. Most of the Megalithic relics in Vietnam have not been excavated, except the wreckages of Hang Gon, Kim Boi, Ta Van Giay, Mau Son. Those relics usually performed as chieftain's grave, either a place for worshipping heroes, ancestors of the community, or the memorial sites. Most of the megalithic monuments in the northern mountains also had a relation to stone worship of primitive inhabitants. Based on the absolute date determining the megalithic monuments in Hang Gon, archaeologists classified Vietnam major megalithic monuments into the category of Iron Age research, dating back to 1<sup>st</sup> century and 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

**Key words:** Megalith; Vietnam.

### 1. Introduction

The term "Megalith" is used for the huge stone relic structures, which might be a single relic or a complex one. Almost all of Megalithic relics were built with big stones arranged closely together without mortar or adhesive matter.

There are some classifications of Megaliths and at times different terms are used for the same type of Megalith. However, their conventional forms consists of: a). Dolmen (stone table), which is a big size monolith supported by some small stones below. b). Menhir (upright stone) which is an upright stone or a group of upright stones used in ancestor worship or

for marking the grave. c). Stone - cist grave (or stone boxes tomb), a type of burial whose base, sides, and cover are made of stone slabs. d). Stone terraces, stepped pyramid - like structures made of an arrangement of big and small stones. Besides, there are other types such as stone jars, stone sarcophagus, stone sculpture, stone wall, stone stairs, etc.

Megalith is a fairly popular form of relic in the world, which belongs to various ages and has various functions. Megalith relics have been built almost all over the world since Prehistoric time. The earliest ones were found in Western

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Europe, belonging to Early Neolithic dated 7000BP. Others which were found belonged to the historical period and contemporary time. Many Megalithic relics have become historical, whereas many others play certain role today.

According to the archaeologists, the functions of Megalithic relics are: Memories, magical or religious, burials, astronomy, competition-authority. The problem which has made scholars interested in this subject is the social structure linked to Megalithic relics, especially in Pre-Proto history. In Southeast Asia, according to researchers, Megalithic sites were built to function as burial relics or symbols of power, or ancestor worship and authority of the leaders of the communities.

## **2. Megalithic relics in Viet Nam**

The Megalithic in Viet Nam is a matter of attraction and admiration which attracted the scholars to do intensive research in Megalithic relics, yet the knowledge of Megalithic is rather limited and there are many more aspects still to be disclosed.

In Viet Nam, the pioneer studies about Megalithic relic were carried out in 1927 by J.Bouchot, who excavated and published very interesting monographs about the dolmen of Hang Gon [9, pp.155-156], [10, pp.114-124].

Up to now, in Viet Nam, the discoveries of Megalithic relics are still in small number but are scattered in almost all the areas of the country. Megalithic relics were found at Hang Gon (Dong Nai), Dong Pho (Quang Ngai), Chu Pa (Gia Lai), Lam Kha (Bac Ninh), Vu Xa (Bac Giang), Kim Boi (Hoa Binh), Tam Dao (Vinh Phuc), Thien

Ke (Tuyen Quang), Nam Dan (Ha Giang), Ban Thanh (Cao Bang), Mau Son (Lang Son), Ta Van Giay (Lao Cai), Soc Son (Ha Noi), Pac Nam (Bac Kan). Most megalithic relics have not been excavated except Hang Gon, Kim Boi, Mau Son, Ta Van Giay. Their forms consist of: Dolmen, Menhir, and Stone-cist.

### *2.1. Dolmen Relics*

There are about 22 relics found from 1975 to 2014 at the provinces of Ha Giang, Cao Bang, Lao Cai, Lang Son, Tuyen Quang, Bac Giang, Vinh Phuc, Bac Kan and Soc Son district (in suburb of Hanoi city). Given below is the review of some typical relics.

#### *2.1.1. Dolmen relics at Nam Dan (Ha Giang Province)*

During the investigation period of the late 2005 in the program "Archaeological research in the Xin Man district of Ha Giang Province", the investigation group from Viet Nam Institute of Archaeology discovered two megalithic relics including dolmens in Nam Dan commune. Their coordinates are 22°06'54" north latitude and 104°48'58" east longitude (figure 1).

The first relic was arranged with degenerated schist stone (top stone) that is amorphous: 2,3m-2,4m long, 1,0m-1,1m wide and 0,35m-0,49m thick; both sides are smooth, without any process traces. This stone was put on 3 other small stones in a tripod position. It is the human arrangement here that makes it possible to distinguish them from other natural stones.

The second relic located near to the first one was also similar in structure. However, the size of the top stone is bigger. This

dolmen is slightly different from first dolmen in that one of its ends lies on two stone legs while the other lies right on the ground.

Up to now, these Megalith relics have merely been discovered and preliminarily studied. There are no archaeological artifacts or vestiges around the dolmens [1].

According to research results of ethnology in this area some local ethnic groups (Nung, Dao ethnic groups) which are still preserving the spirit stone worship. They believe in poly animism (all things have souls).

In the Nung people's conception, the universe is divided into three Muong: Muong haven is fairyland, people's Muong is on the group, devil's Muong is people living underground. So every year, they carry out spirit stone worship at dolmen relics (figure 2). They have more objects for worship: ancestor worship, spirit ground, spirit forest worship, etc., especially, the worship associated with rituals of agricultural proliferation. Nowadays, at Nam Dan, the spirit stone worship is an intangible cultural heritage which should be preserved and sustained.

Although there is little information about Dolmen Nam Dan's dating, function and meaning for their builders but they still play certain role today. However, in my view Nam Dan dolmens belong to ancient times. Today these relics have become main tourist attraction places in Ha Giang.

#### 2.1.2. Dolmen relic at Thien Ke (Tuyen Quang Province)

The dolmen relic was discovered in 2009. This dolmen is situated in Thien Ke commune, Son Duong District, Tuyen

Quang Province and latitude of 21057'06" north and longitude of 105046'48" east. The dolmen has the shape of a five-leg stone table, the top is an amorphous stone slab without marks of hitting, cutting or renewing. The five legs of the table-style dolmen are natural small-size stones without processed traces. Dimension of dolmen: long 2,2m-2,5m, width 1,2m-1,5m, high 1,2m (figure 3) [2].

There are no archeological artifacts or vestiges around the dolmen's foot. Survey results in the ethnography show that there are folklore legends related to this site. The theory established that the relics were related to the tomb of the leader of the region in the past. Based on comparison with archaeological materials in Southeast Asia, initially, the archaeologists guessed the first dating to AD for this site.

Due to the limited financial condition and the type of relic, excavation is almost impossible to be carried out. As a result, we only provide here some information related to location, dimension, and state of these dolmens.

In future, after excavation and studies, these relics should be preserved and promoted to service tourism.

#### 2.1.3. Dolmen relic at Dai Dinh (Vinh Phuc Province)

In May 2009, the Megalith relic was discovered by the group of archeologist from Vietnam Institute of Archaeology.

This dolmen site belongs to Dai Dinh Commune, Tam Dao District, Vinh Phuc Province and is located near the foot Tam Dao Mountain. It has latitude of 21018'501"

north and longitude of 105046'159" east. Its coordinates is: 21046'27" north latitude and 105058'07" east longitude (picture 4).

Relic consists of a magmatic metamorphic schist slab shaped like a ship longer than 3 meters, 1 meter wider and nearly 0.5 meter thick, distributed in the north-south direction. This stone slab was put above 4 other small stones.

There are also no processed traces on the upper face and the stone legs. This dolmen is slightly different from dolmen Thien Khe in that, in the underside of the stone slab contained traces of repair.

There are not any archeological artifacts found on the under surface and the relic. What remains in the dolmen in Dai Dinh are large stones used for various purposes by ancient people. We can only rely on their material, shape and size to estimate their function, structure and dating.

This dolmen has a lot of similarities to "table type" and "go table type" according to Korean dolmen classification [11, p.49]. There kinds of dolmen, which is of the earliest date from the Bronze Age, appear in large quantity in Korean Peninsula.

According to comparison with archaeological documents in Southeast Asia, the dating of Dai Dinh dolmen relic was estimated to belong to the late bronze period, around 2000BP [3, pp:205-206]. At Dai Dinh, some folklore worships are associated these dolmen relic.

In future, after excavation and studies, this relic should be preserved and promoted to service tourism as in the case of dolmen Ha Giang.

#### 2.1.4. Dolmen relics at Soc Son (in suburb of Hanoi City)

Soc Son District is located in northern Hanoi capital city, 35 kilometers far from the city center. Soc Son is a midland with various kinds of terrain. Its height reduces gradually from northwest to southeast and the land is divided into three different areas: plains, midland and mountains. Two Megalith sites were discovered in Minh Phu commune when the group of archaeologists from University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Hanoi carried out archaeological research project in connection to the preparation of the celebration of 1000 year anniversary of Thang Long - Ha Noi Capital. This part is based on the document of Mrs. Nguyen Thi Trung, a researcher of Ha Noi Museum [7].

##### Dolmen relic 1:

This dolmen is situated in Thai Lai hamlet and has latitude of 21017'67,9" north and a longitude of 105045'54,3" east. The dolmen is in the shape of a three-leg stone table, whose surface is an oval slab of stone without marks of hitting, cutting or renewing. It's two sides and under face are slightly flat with a lot of big ground traces. The three legs of the table-style dolmen are natural large-size stones without processed traces (figure 5). There are no archaeological artifacts or vestiges around the dolmen's surface. Dimension of the dolmen: long 4m, with 1,4m, high 1,1m.

##### Dolmen relic 2:

This dolmen relic belongs to Minh Tan hamlet and is located in the area of Dong Do impounding dam. It has latitude of 21018'50,1" north and longitude of

105046'15,9" east. This dolmen is slightly different from dolmen 1 in size and arrangement of stones below. There are a lot of big ground traces on the upper face. Dolmen's dimension: long 5m, large 2,2m.

Two relic sites found in Minh Phu Commune remain intact. There are not any archaeological artifacts found on the under surface and around the dolmen relics. These dolmen have a lot of similarities to Thien Ke, Dai Dinh relics.

In near future, after excavation and studies, these relics should be preserved and sustained to service tourism.

#### 2.1.5. Megalith relics at Ta Van Giay (Lao Cai Province)

In 2004, the Megalith relic was discovered and excavated by a group of archaeologists from University of Social Science and Humanities in Hanoi who were carrying out archaeological research project in Lao Cai Province.

This dolmen site belongs to Ta Van Giay Commune, Sapa District, Lao Cai Province and is located near the famous ancient stone field of Sapa. Its coordinates are: 22018'0,7" north latitude and 103053'12,6" east longitude [4, pp 33-38].

Archaeologists have discovered 07 large stone bars, having rectangular cross section, very similar in size (figure 6). These stone bars are not in situ. They have gradually slipped down from the top of a high hillside.

During excavation, archaeologists surveyed the area around the Megalithic relics and discovered some fragments of pottery of the Tran period (about 14<sup>th</sup> Century). They were about 20 meters away

from the stone bars. Some metal objects have also been found in the area by the local people. These objects are associated worship and have been dated to late Nguyen period (about 19<sup>th</sup> Century).

However, the relationship between the pottery and metal objects with the large stone bars Ta Van Giay has not yet been determined. The Megalith site at Ta Van Giay could not have existed alone. It must have had certain relation to the ancient stone fields in Sapa and their counterparts found in the area (possible references are to some Asian sites such as complexes of Megalith sites at Yoshinogari, Ashiziri Cape (Japan), the field of jars at Xiem Khoang (Laos). Sunda (Indonesia) and other similar sites located along Vietnamese - Chinese borders [4, p.36].

The date of their appearance and existence are impossible to identify exactly with current data. It is probable that the site was set up during the medieval period and continued to contemporary times. The large stone bars were once used intentionally and associated to a generation of local inhabitants living in that area (reasonably Tay- Thai minorities). Those stones bear megalith ideas and have various functions such as burial and votive area, and symbol of power seems to be the main function [4, p.36].

Today, in the Sapa area tourist routes have been formed: from famous ancient stone field of Sapa to Megalithic relics Ta Van Giay.

#### 2.2. Menhir Relics

There are more than 20 Menhir relics which were found during the excavation in 1984 at Kim Boi, Lac Son Districts, Hoa

Binh province (figure 7). Other valuable objects were also found by the archaeologists from Vietnam Institute of Archaeology, during the excavation [8].

The associated artifact remains, most of which are decorated with ceramics suggest a date of 12<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> Century AD for these relics.

According to archaeologists, these Menhirs were probably used as burial markers and built by ancient Muong people (ancient Viet - Muong group). Now days some of these tombs have been destroyed due to increase in agricultural activity and various other factors. Although these are valuable relics of Megalithic culture of Vietnam, they have not yet been carefully researched. Recently, archaeologists have returned to these Menhir sites, to study and reconstruct the structure of the Megalithic relics with the aim to attract tourism and in the near future will form a part of the tourist route to the Megalithic sites.

### *2.3. Stone-Cist Relics*

1. Stone-Cist relic at Hang Gon (Dong Nai Province) In 1927, a Stone-Cist relic Hang Gon was discovered and excavated by J.Bouchot, a French road engineer when he opened the new inter-provincial road.

This relic belong to Hang Gon Commune, Long Khanh Town, Dong Nai Province. Its coordinates are: 10051'50,8" north latitude and 107013'51,5" east longitude. According to the description of J.Bouchot study, Hang Gon Megalith tomb was formed by large slabs of marble pillars and weighs about 30-40 tons. The tomb is rectangular and measures 4.2 meters long, 2.7 meter across, 1.6 meters high. 6 panels

assembled in marble have been used on the surface of the cells with 4 vertical panels as wall stone and two panels as a horizontal bottom and lid. Many pillars around the tomb are made of granite and which rise to a height of 7.5 meters. the top portion of the pillars are carved in concave saddle.

Trace of fire trails soil stretched arc, over which a lot of coal ash and slag metals on the body fragments of pottery along with two bronze objects have been discovered [9], [10].

Since the discovery and excavation, Megalithic tomb Hang Gon has attracted attention and research interest of many scientists around the world such as Parmentier H, Gaspardone E, Malleret L, Saurin Ed, Fontaine H, etc. Bouchot J. places the relic Hang Gon to the Neolithic age whereas Malleret L. places the relic to the Bronze Age.

Just after liberation in 1975, Vietnam's archaeology held a number of verified surveys of Megalithic tomb and in 1991 Megalithic relic Hang Gon was restored (figure 8).

2. From September to November 2007 large number of excavations has been carried out mainly in the adjacent areas to Stone - Cist relic [6, pp.45-52]. The excavations were carried out in 3 areas with a total area of 967 meters. All the excavated holes were dug deep in the range of 1.0m to 2.2m. The cultural artifacts as well as clusters of broken pottery, stones often appear isolated from a depth of 0.35m to 0.40m to 0.90 to 1.00 meters, whereas most concentrated appear at a depth of 0.60 - 0.80m, in the lower part of the hard basalt

layer of reddish brown soil and upper layers of soft soil. Many artifacts of ceramic, stone, grinding tools, and soil stains fire, coal ash were found along with the remains of the stone making workshops. Archaeologists have also found stone panels, stone pillars, many pieces of stone wastes and working tools, which show that the ancient people had carried large rocks for processing big stone slabs, stone pillars for architectural use, to the grave. Most of the pottery collected was perhaps, brought for ceremonial functions. These include different types of small jars, dishes, bowls cups, etc. [6].

Through comparative analysis, the researchers have concluded that of the owners of the tomb may have been a leader of a tribe or tribal alliances with economically military powers. Up to now, archaeologists have analyzed 13 samples of charcoal, and C14 dating results show that these ranged from 2500 to 1700 BP.

Nowadays, maximum, Megalith relics have been preserved and have become tourist attraction.

### **3. Some remarks**

3.1. According to the recent studies, Megalith structures are found distributed throughout the world. Vietnam's Megalith may have been a part of the Megalith cultural complex of Asia. It is possible to use Megalith materials from Southeast Asia to make a comparative study of the relics in Vietnam.

In Vietnam, the study of the Megalith is still at an infancy stage as up till now, the number of Megalithic relics discovered is very small. Only preliminary study of the

Megalith relics in Viet Nam has been made and what we have is the preliminary description of each relic. There are many more aspects such as owners, functions which need to be studied.

Up to the present time, more than 40 Megalith relics found so far were mainly built in the mountainous area of North Vietnam, which have not been excavated except for Kim Boi, Hang Gon, Ta Van Giay, Mau Son. Only Hang Gon relic has been dated whereas it is impossible to define the dates of the others.

As outlined above, Vietnam Megalith is of three main types: Dolmen; Menhir and Stone- Cist, of which Dolmen was the main.

The Dolmen relics were mostly found distributed in North Vietnam, especially in the Northeast mountainous area. Some of them have also been found from the Middle Land of Vietnam. In Korea, Dolmen relics are of three main types: table type Dolmen, go-table type Dolmen and unsupported cap stone type Dolmen. In Vietnam, the unsupported cap stone type Dolmen has never been found.

The Menhir relics in Vietnam were distributed mainly in limestone mountain area of Hoa Binh and Thanh Hoa Provinces. These have never been found in the Northeast mountainous area. These Menhirs were probably used as burial markers and built by ancient Muong people (ancient Viet -Muong group).

The Stone-Cist relic type was rather rare, only found in Southern Vietnam. Megalith Hang Gon is considered to be linked with the ancient state or civilization of the Dong Nai River.

3.2. As in some Asian countries, the Megalith relics in Vietnam were also built to function as burial sites or symbol of social status: symbol of community leader's power, symbol of the wealth and popularity of a community leader: magical or religious purpose, ancestor spirits, etc. However, assumption of the above function of the Megalith relics is conjectural.

Besides, according to the results of ethnological survey in Xin Man, Ha Giang province shows that the set up construction of Dolmen site might have been be closely associated to the spirit stone worship and ancestor worship. Dolmens at Xin Man were probably a form of altars.

3.3. Regarding the absolute chronology of Vietnam Megalith, especially of Dolmen is not yet established. Many suggestions have been forwarded by various researchers but none of them have been able to give scientific chronology. Most of the Megalith relics found on northern Vietnam were not able to supply reliable information about their dating. The chronology problems are very important to solve the question of the origin of Vietnam Megalith. It also brings the question of the modification process among Vietnam Megalith relics. But we believe that more extensive field work and excavations will provide abundant dates in near future.

Based on the existing data, the earliest Megalith relics in Vietnam were from the Bronze-iron period to the Historical archaeology time.

Basically, most of Megalith relics in Vietnam belong to the past Megalith tradition, though some sites are still used

for votive practices by the local people. However, these sites, in fact, have lost their initial function and the present local people almost know nothing about the original function as well as the dates of these relics.

Based on their periods, Megalith in Vietnam might include two stages: The early stage (Pre-Proto History) associated to primitive community leader's power and the later one (Historical time) associated to local chieftain of the minorities.

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### Some illustrating images for Megalith Relics in Vietnam



Picture 1. Dolmen relic at Nam Dan (Ha Giang Province)



Picture 2: The spirit stone worship at Nam Dan's Dolmen relic



Picture 3: Dolmen relic at Thien Ke (Tuyen Quang Province)



Picture 4: Dolmen at Dai Dinh (Vinh Phuc Province)



Picture 5: Dolmen at Thai Lai hamlet  
(in the suburb of Hanoi city)



Picture 6: The excavation of Ta Van Giay  
(Lam Thi My Dung)



Picture 7: Megalithic relics of Kim Boi  
(Hoa Binh Province)



Picture 8: Megalithic relic Hang Gon was  
restored in 1995